The Baptist War didn’t just end slavery in Jamaica

It utterly reshaped the country’s religious landscape.

by Philip Jenkins in the December 16, 2020 issue

Jamaican political activist Marcus Garvey (George Grantham Bain collection / US Library of Congress)

In 1831, Jamaica was the setting for the largest slave revolt that ever occurred in the British West Indies. From an enslaved population of 300,000, an amazing 60,000 joined the uprising, which was chiefly led and organized by Baptists, especially the deacon Sam Sharpe.

Modern-day Americans devote much attention to recovering the history of slavery and racial exploitation in their own country—and especially the role of religion in that story, both in justifying oppression and sparking liberation. Some might even recall 1831 as the year of Nat Turner’s revolt in Virginia. But as Jamaica’s evocatively named Baptist War suggests, the Black experience in the United States, past and present, finds very close analogies among the country’s near neighbors.

The sheer scale of Caribbean slavery is appalling. From the 1520s through the 1870s, 400,000 slaves were imported into what became the United States. The combined figure for the British and French Caribbean colonies was 3.4 million. Jamaica alone brought in almost a million enslaved Africans over that time period.

Early slave owners in Jamaica were conflicted over whether to expose their captives to Christian teachings, although Anglican and Wesleyan missions made some progress. A transformation came in the 1780s with the arrival of a Virginia-born freedman, George Lisle, who began a very successful Baptist mission. The Baptists soon won popularity for the role they allowed Black members in their structures, especially as deacons, and Baptist networks enabled communication and organization. The Baptist War massively accelerated the abolition of slavery on the island and a transition to wage labor.

But that historic change did not end poverty and exploitation, nor the dominance of a society founded on the supremacy of a White colonial elite. Another Baptist deacon, Paul Bogle, led an antipoverty uprising in 1865 that resulted in bloody repression on a dreadful scale. Even after Jamaica secured its independence from Britain in 1962, social justice activism continued to glorify those Christian heroes of resistance. Bogle, to take one example, has been the subject of many reggae songs, including ones by such stars as Bob Marley, Third World, Burning Spear, and Steel Pulse.

That heritage of resistance has left its stamp on Jamaica. Throughout its history, the country has combined passionate spiritual interest and commitment with a rejection of religious traditions connected to the old order. Jamaica and nearby islands have a long tradition of radical innovation, using messianic and pan-African ideas, usually presented in religious form. These were explicitly theologies of liberation long before that term was invented. They also included their distinctive theological currents, sometimes venerating John the Baptist as an equal of or superior to Jesus.

Often these ideas have been imported to the United States, where their Caribbean roots were easily forgotten. Marcus Garvey was Jamaican, and his United Negro Improvement Association won a sensational following among Black Americans after the First World War. In Omaha, Nebraska, in the 1920s, Grenada-born immigrant Louise Little was a key Garvey organizer, together with her Baptist preacher husband. Their child, Malcolm Little, would change his name to Malcolm X. Garvey himself left a powerful mark on the Black Muslim movement then emerging in the US

as well. Nadia Nurhussein offers a terrific survey of this interchange of ideas in her recent book *Black Land: Imperial Ethiopianism and African America*.

In the 1930s, Jamaica was the birthplace of the Rastafari movement, with its messianic devotion to the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie. That was combined with a mystical view of sacred Africa and a devotion to its holy martyrs, the whole symbolized in the colors of its Ethiopian-derived flag: red, green, and gold. The movement is not strong numerically, with perhaps 50,000 or fewer members in Jamaica. Even so, through its influence on popular culture and music, especially reggae, Rastafarian ideas, imagery, and vocabulary have spread throughout the Western world. In urban Britain, where so many Jamaican immigrants made their home from the 1940s onward, that influence is unavoidable.

Modern-day Jamaica demonstrates the weakness of the older churches, with their colonial associations. Today, around two-thirds of Jamaicans define themselves as Protestant, but only a small proportion follow the British-derived mainline churches. Anglicans, Methodists, and United Church members make up 8 percent of the population, with Catholics another 2 percent. Even those Baptists who contributed so powerfully to the nation’s history now stand below 7 percent.

By far the largest category among Protestants is Pentecostals, who make up over a third of the population. The island’s largest single church is the Seventh-day Adventists, with 12 percent of Jamaicans. Meanwhile, over 20 percent of Jamaicans are religiously unaffiliated, along the lines of the American nones.

Christianity, particularly in its Baptist form, was key to Jamaica’s fight against slavery. The spiritual ferment arising from that struggle created a rich diversity of traditions.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Jamaica’s Baptist War.”